

An Invitation to Shape the Nature of England

Shropshire Wildlife Trust welcomes the opportunity to be involved in this consultation and whole heartedly support the proposal for a White Paper on the Natural Environment. We have been at the sharp end of environmental action for almost 50 years and can see the need for a change in both attitude and action by society as a whole. The real challenge will be convincing others that this is necessary.

Question 1 - What do we need to do to embed the true value of our natural resources in decision making at all levels?

(a) How can we reflect all the different kinds of value described above?

Shropshire Wildlife Trust is very aware that the general public need to see the 'environment' differently. It is imperative that society puts a value on flood water storage capacity, carbon capture and management of soil resources; and has a greater understanding that these processes are life sustaining, as well as being vital to sustain biological diversity.

We would draw attention to the work that has already been done in this field, for example the various reports released following the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* in 2005, and the recently published (September 2010) Lawton Review '*Making Space for Nature*', both of which lay out the need for a different approach to the natural environment.

We cannot see how this could be achieved without legislative change, or some form of identification and ultimately mapping of the areas that are important to provide the 'ecosystem services' and 'ecological restoration zones'.

We need a culture change at all levels but this needs recognition and support across all local and national government departments, and new powers to implement new policies.

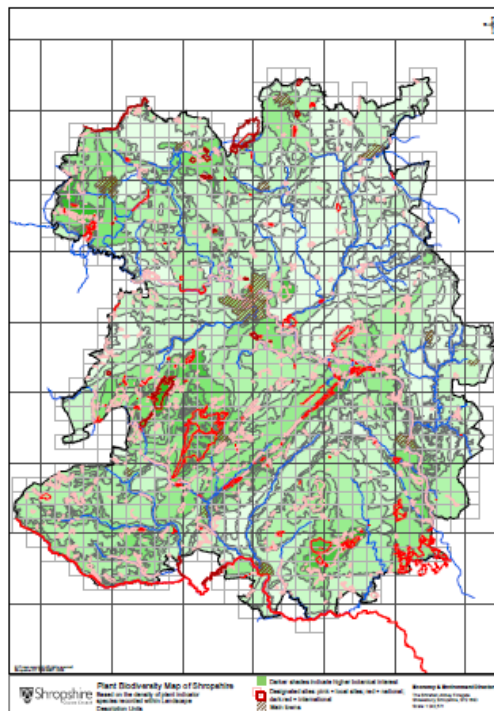
It can be done; in fact we are way behind other countries in this respect; many have already identified and implemented ecological networks, for example the Netherlands National Ecological Network which was established in 1990. In mainland Europe pan-European networks are also being developed, and for an island nation such as the UK it is even more essential to look at this approach as our life-supporting environment is even more vulnerable to change and loss.

Question 2 – Have we identified the right overarching challenges for the White Paper to consider?

- (a) If not, what should we focus on?**
- (b) How should we approach these challenges?**

Yes – exactly the right focus because the discussion document acknowledges the real value of the environment and the challenges ahead.

The approaches to take must include greater co-ordination between existing departments alongside a mapping out where ecological restoration zones may go. Within our local Shropshire Biodiversity Action Partnership, we have already begun to map out the most important areas in the county, but the real problem often lies in getting multi-agency alignment within and delivering coordinated action within individual business frameworks.



Map showing potential ecological restoration zones for plants in Shropshire produced by Shropshire County Council 2009

A first step could involve a review of the current budget for environmental improvements. Here in the West Midlands 63% of the land is under agri-environment schemes. Perhaps payments for Single Farm Payment and Entry

Level Stewardship could be used more effectively to ensure that landowners are rewarded for their contribution to ecosystem services?

Nationally, almost 3.2 million hectares – equal to eight million football pitches – have already been signed up to Entry Level Stewardship, Higher Level Stewardship and Organic Entry Level Stewardship schemes since the first agreements started in August 2005, it must be possible to co-ordinate these schemes to greater effect.

The Lawton Review argued the need to for ecological restoration zones and estimated the costs of establishing them to be between £600 million and £1.1 billion. The current budget for Higher Level Scheme is £700 million and for Entry Level Scheme £3.9 billion. Existing public money could be used to greater effect if all Government Departments were working to the same aim.

What is needed is clear prioritization and a plan to which everyone can work to.

Question 3 – What are the exiting policies and practices aimed at protecting England’s natural assets (including but not limited to those set out above on our biodiversity, seas, water bodies, air and soil) that currently work most effectively?

The existing legislation to protect the core wildlife sites in the countryside, the nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest, appears to be working better since the 2010 PSA target to get sites into favourable conservation condition. However, there are simply not enough of them to be an effective method of sustaining biodiversity or to provide ecosystem services.

Losses of these sites have slowed down through improved protection through the planning system. However, in Shropshire losses can still occur, for example last year at Prees Heath SSSI where small but significant areas of lowland heathland supporting nationally important populations of Silver Studded Blue butterfly were lost under a lorry park.

Site protection needs to be maintained and sustained, and management improved where some sites are still at risk of decline, or may still take many years to recover. In some cases recovery may be hampered by surrounding land use, as is the case at Wem Moss SSSI and the adjoining Fenns-Whixall Moss SSSI which are hugely influenced by past land drainage of the lowland raised peat body, and intensification of farming around the margins. In this respect the current legislation is not sufficiently strong enough to reverse these changes, or may even conflict with other legislation (such as land drainage acts) as only voluntary mechanisms are available.

In the marine environment the situation is improving with the recent Marine and Coastal Access Bill 2009 – but much work remains to be done in identifying key

sites and work to protect them is progressing relatively slowly. Despite being a land-locked County in Shropshire, there was huge support from our members, members of the public and our MPs to see this legislation happen.

There are also other policies and practices such as catchment management plans and the Water Framework Directive, which help set priorities for action on the ground, and this work should not be overlooked as it also provides useful baseline information.

(a) What works less well?

SSSIs are potentially the core of any ecological restoration zone, but are not sufficient in themselves to provide a sustainable network. Within the countryside there are 'second tier', non-statutory county wildlife sites, in Shropshire we have identified almost 600 of these areas. However, as they are non-statutory they have very little protection.

In essence they can be taken into consideration when planning decisions are made as they are noted on environmental records and acknowledged in planning policy statements. However, most are lost through changes in agricultural land use, and/or ownership, and this is outside of the planning system.

In Shropshire we have had a system of identification and notification of local sites since the late 1970s, and have lost well over 100 sites since then – around 20% in total. Although new sites are discovered, recent survey work has shown that almost 80% are in a poor condition, and this is reflected in the reporting done by local authorities for National Indicator 197, where only 18.7% of local sites were considered to be under active management for biodiversity.

Despite close working with Natural England Stewardship officers, we struggle to get coordinated action to ensure these local sites get into the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme. In addition, funding for environmental enhancement is relatively short-term – 10 years, and often requires a level of administration which many find onerous in relation to the payments which they will receive.

Question 4. – What mechanisms should we focus on to ensure we manage our natural systems more effectively in the future?

In Shropshire, the Wildlife Trust has identified key geographical areas where we feel we can deliver maximum benefit for people and for wildlife by focusing our work at a landscape scale areas across the county. Building on the success of a multi agency partnership project on The Stiperstones Ridge, led by the Trust and Natural England a substantial area of heathland habitat was restored, with many other benefits such as tourism, sustainable land management, learning opportunities and community engagement coming essentially from joined-up working.

The areas identified for landscape-scale working will overlap considerably with areas which are likely to be identified as ecological restoration zones to deliver the principle of 'ecosystem services'. The mechanism we suggest must include more co-ordinated working across all Government Departments and Agencies, as well as amongst other relevant organizations.

(a) How do we define success?

Success (or otherwise) can only probably be defined when clear targets have been identified; for wildlife this has already been trialed to some extent through the work of the biodiversity partnerships. In terms of biodiversity, success can be said to be when species or habitat losses stabilize, halts, then increases and then overall quality of habitat or species population numbers improve. There are methodologies for assessing this.

Similarly for water quality, targets for improvements (a measure of success) have been identified through the European Water Framework Directive, as far as we are aware the Environment Agency already has good maps of where there is capacity for flood water storage, but have lacked the resources or political support to implement many natural floodwater storage schemes.

(b) How can we agree on common goals and assess our progress towards them?

In tune with the aspirations of the current Government to foster a 'Big Society', community engagement at all levels would be key in agreeing common goals.

We feel there is widespread support for new legislation and a refreshed way of thinking about the countryside. This is borne out by increased support in both the Trust's membership in recent years and in general interest and enthusiasm for the environment, not only for its intrinsic value but for the benefits to health and for recreation.

It is obvious that Government cannot fund all this work alone, and that alternative sources will have to be found, either through planning gain or through exploring 'Conservation Credits' with businesses and the industrial sector, and this in turn will automatically engage a much wider cross-section of society.

Question 5 – How can we reduce our carbon footprint on the natural environment abroad, through the goods, services and products we use?

Fundamentally we should look to source more products locally, including timber as well as foodstuffs, and develop better use of recycled materials. This would not only reduce carbon emissions through transportation costs, but should also help protect vulnerable ecosystems in other countries.

Question 6 – What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?

As discussed under Question 1, many other European countries are ahead in their thinking about viewing the landscape as an ecological network. Examples of this work have been pulled together by the European Centre for Nature Conservation, and can be viewed on their website: http://www.ecnc.org/green-infrastructure_25.html

In Shropshire, because of its focus as a centre for future population growth, the local authority in Shrewsbury commissioned a Green Infrastructure Study in 2008 in advance of new housing development. This study identified a multi-functional green network within the town, and although the ideas have not been implemented to any great extent, it forms the basis of a body of work which could easily be developed further to include additional ecosystem services. The web link for this document is:

[http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/planning.nsf/viewAttachments/MCAL-87KHZT/\\$file/shrewsbury-green-infrastructure-study-final-report.pdf](http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/planning.nsf/viewAttachments/MCAL-87KHZT/$file/shrewsbury-green-infrastructure-study-final-report.pdf)

Question 7 – How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumer or by shaping policy?

In the environmental sector, the public is usually enthusiastic, and as mentioned earlier we have a growing membership and our events and activities are well supported. We are usually limited by capacity which is inevitably linked to funding, to meet this demand. In Shropshire we are constantly exploring new partnerships – with the health sector, with local businesses and with other community groups.

Gathering baseline information on the environment is very often done through local action, and the Trust has supported community groups such as the Upper Clun Wildlife Group, the Upper Onny Wildlife Group and the Whitchurch Water Vole Group to get involved with wildlife on their doorstep, and there is always a demand to do more. Getting involved in a practical way is a first step to being a more informed consumer or someone who will engage in shaping policy in the future, and we often describe it in the Trust as taking someone on a journey from initial interest to full engagement.

Question 8 – What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?

Our vision should be that everyone takes an interest in the natural environment, because their life depends upon it! So far we reach those sectors of the community which already have an interest - the challenge is to make the issue relevant to those who are currently not engaged in any way.

Although individuals, businesses and communities must be somehow involved in setting agendas for action – any action must be based on good scientific evidence, otherwise efforts will be wasted.

Civil Society or Big Society should be engaged at many different levels in managing sites, collecting information and improving the environment, as there would be simply too much to do to expect a select few organizations or landowners to deliver a sustainable countryside.

Question 9 – How best can Government incentivise innovative and effective action on the natural environment, across England, at the local level.

- a) How best can local government and other local partners work together to improve local outcomes on the natural environment, and pursue a more integrated approach linking a healthy natural environment to economic prosperity, sustainable development and a better quality of life, health and well being?**

We suggest that existing partnerships could be widened, and/or specific groupings created to develop ecological restoration zones. Realistically this would only be effective if it became a statutory duty for local government to specifically undertake this work. Partnerships already exist, but they lack the power and influence to really be effective in the face of other pressures – many of which come from conflicting Government policies.

- b) What are the most effective mechanisms for managing the natural environment where cross-boundary issues are involved, and making the link to other mechanisms for economic growth, transport and planning?**

The Wildlife Trusts are already developing cross-boundary working through partnerships in landscape-scale projects. For example, we are developing a 'Source to the Sea' project looking at best practice land management along the River Severn, from where it rises in Mid Wales to where it enters the Severn Estuary in Gloucestershire. We have long been aware that natural features, ecological processes, wildlife habitats and species do not recognize administrative boundaries.

- c) How best can the value of the natural environment be considered within local planning?**

By having a strategic picture in the first place of what needs to be achieved; and a by having a clear picture of what work needs funding and where best to direct funding through planning gain.

Question 10 – How best could the economy reflect the true value of nature’s services in the way business is done, to drive smarter, greener growth?

.A higher monetary value on the environment and the services it provides will inevitably lead to recognition of its importance, and stimulate enterprise.

Question 11 – Responsible businesses are already looking for ways to reduce their impact on the environment. How can we encourage more action like this?

Shropshire Wildlife Trust already engages with several local and national businesses such as Muller, Cap Gemini and Ricoh to help them fulfill their own Corporate Social Responsibilities. We provide volunteering opportunities for their workforce on our nature reserves as a team building exercise. Given the success of this to date, we suspect there could be a greater demand for this type of involvement with the environment as our capacity currently only just about meets demand, with very little advertising on our part.

Question 12 – What are the barriers to joining up and seeking multiple benefits from our natural assets

There are many barriers; perhaps the biggest being that most of the land is in private land ownership. In addition, funding to effect change may not be forthcoming and that there may be a general resistance to anything other than the status quo.

Question 13 – What are the barriers to thinking big and taking a landscape scale approach to managing our natural assets

In the experience of the Trust, the barriers to thinking big include getting all the existing agencies and organizations to align their work to deliver significant change on the ground. Having said this, the ‘Back to purple’ project on the Stiperstones did work well with a multi-agency approach, and delivered the restoration of a significant area of upland heathland habitat. It can work, but sustaining this multi-agency approach in the longer term is harder work.

It is relatively easy to persuade the conservation community of the need to think big, but other agencies have other priorities, and a lack of funding is also an issue. Currently it is not possible to achieve all we would like through HLS alone, given it is a limited fund, and application is voluntary basis.

There is a great deal of education work go in tandem with the development of a landscape scale approach and it is important that the messages comes in at all levels, including strong leadership and direction from the Government. It is hard not to see how politics will not come into play, and it will rely on everyone seeing the benefits.

Question 14 – What should be the priorities for the UK’s role in EU and international action to protect and enhance the natural environment at home and abroad.

By leading by example, protecting our internationally important sites and species; and adopting the principles of ecological restoration zones across the whole of the UK.

Question 15 – If you could choose just one priority action for the Natural Environment White Paper to drive forward locally, nationally or internationally – what would it be?

By implementing the Lawton Review recommendations in full.

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